Synopsis

Trauma and ‘Unconcealment’: A Study of Holocaust Narratives from 1990 to 2015

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The systematic extermination of the European Jewish population by the hands of the Nazis and their cohorts, conventionally known as the Holocaust, in the wake of the Second World War, has become a complex site of philosophical, political, historiographical, and literary probing, especially throughout Europe and America. These enquiries have resulted in a staggering and dazzling array of scholarship, compelling us to meditate on human capabilities and their limits. The current debates surrounding ethics, representation, responsibility, truth, complicity, human responses to conditioning, and even historicity are almost impossible to imagine without a reference to the Holocaust. My thesis aims to map the connection between the ethics of witnessing, the ironic testimony, the representation of trauma, the uncanny return of memory and the past, and the limits of truth in history and literature. Even though most of these topics have been well-covered in previous scholarship, my thesis would argue for the ironic continuity of uncanny trauma memory as an architext in representational daring, which serves the purpose of testimony, a responsibility that is inherited as an ethical imperative. I trace the figure of the kynic in the ironic protagonists of the Holocaust testimonial literature. Taking cues from Foucault and Sloterdijk, whose studies of the ancient kynic philosophers and forms of autocratic societies inspire this reading, I try to establish bearing testimony in ironic and allegorical mode as a kynical stance which stands opposed to the sovereign power's cynicism. In this dissertation, I discuss Paul Celan, Anne Michaels, Imre Kertész, and Anita Desai to argue that testimonial bearing is an inherited responsibility where the victim salutes us to pay the debt of obligation. I support my claims with the help of trauma theory, memory studies, deconstruction, and meditations on ethics, responsibility, and representation, along with the scholarship of intertextuality.

Introduction

The primary theoretical thrust of my dissertation comes from Benjamin, Foucault, and Sloterdijk. Walter Benjamin's studies of violence in *Toward the Critique of Violence* and of allegory in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* provide the essential framework to read the Holocaust as an allegory of trauma-inducing genocide, which can be culturally transmitted and framed in intertextual dialogue. I read allegory as a dialogic poetics where multiple textualities cohabit, complementing each other. Thus, allegory is the allegory of heterogeneity; it is a discourse within a discourse and other's discourse, compelling us to read and reread in infinite iteration. Benjamin's reading of allegory as an indirect method to convey historicity and invest meaning to death helps me reinscribe kynics, following Foucault, as an allegory of *alēthēs bios*, or life as truth. The kynics, according to Foucault, are those who survive a war field and return to tell the truth. They are soldiers who, through their experience, live diacritically to sift through truth, or parrhesia, from false words or flattery and, in their anomalous living, create a discourse of insurgency. Often, this discourse is ironical and combative, as in a diatribe, and often, this discourse is silent and nonviolent, as in askesis. In Sloterdijk's reimagination, Kynics are cheeky meta-cynics who, mimicking the cynicism of the sovereign, expose the powerful for what they are. This ironic sabotage and insurgent discourse, in experimental reinscription or anomalous living, embed the lives of Jewish intellectuals who survived the Holocaust. Thus, in Celan's experiment with the German language, or Jakob Beer's relentless search for his sister's fate in *Fugitive Pieces,* we can find a commitment to diatribe and parrhesia. Similarly, Kertész's continuous rewriting of his own experiences in fictional mode while intertextually borrowing from major European writers shows how the allegorical discourse of intertextuality can frame the truth better since it is not retrievable in its originality. I borrow the concept of unconcealment from Heidegger, for whom it is a negative means to reach a semblance of truth, or as Heidegger says, it is not

yet truth, but the possibility of truth (*On* Time and Being 69). Redefined as aletheia, truth is not-forgetting or re-calling. This return of memory, of parrhesia, as symbolised by the kynics, however, also carries the notion of uncanny and a *flaschenpost*, a message in a bottle. Uncanny, conceived negatively, shows the violent sway of the sovereign is ever present, and conceived positively, it reaffirms the nestling of the other within the homogenous imaginary of fascist governments. On the other hand, *flaschenpost* symbolises a return of the message, rewritten and reframed by a non-locatable reader, and through this traversal, the message is transformed and transmuted, revealing startling new insights. Thus, in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, which simultaneously reads the tragedies of the Holocaust and British colonialism as practised in India, we find an aesthetic solidaritarian and translational reading of trauma which traverses the narrow confines of uniqueness to a more dialogic negotiation. Translation and transference, reimagined as *flaschenpost*, is an act of rereading and rewriting in planetary awareness, where the original text undergoes a change and a reassertion of relevance, which is an essential act of recalling a memory. Remembrance, thus, is a constellatory act of translation, often triggered by, like the trajectory of *flaschenpost*, a belated understanding. The memory returns, like a kynic scout, helping us to diacritically make sense of the society inflicted by the sovereign power's sway, and obligates us to practice parrhesia as a witness by translating our experiences in allegorical form. Allegory, especially ironic allegory, I argue, is a suitable mode of expression for the precarious creatures, a term I borrow from Santner, to symbolise the bare life, because in its indirect method, it saves them from direct harm, and also because it is symptomatic of the indirectness of truth conceived as unconcealment. The traumatic truth undergoes a process of acting out and working through before it is intelligibly structured in creative anamnesis. What is represented is not truth but an unveiling and, therefore, a veiling of startling insights borrowed from a network of referentialities.

Nazis made ahistorical and acultural claims to trumpet prejudiced rhetoric, which helped normalise the politics of persecution. The creation of this imaginary enemy, who is often a composite figure of everything the Nazis considered as "un-German," was symbiotically related to what Zygmunt Bauman has called "retrotopia" (Bauman) – a nostalgia for and glorification of past achievements, which are often exclusivist and imaginary in origin. In this discursive and ideological practice, as recorded by Richard J. Evans and Geoffrey Herf, the Jews, the Romas, the physically and mentally "unfit" people, the homosexuals, and even non-Nazi political activists were not considered as a life worth grievable, to borrow from Judith Butler. Their lives are less grievable, and therefore they do not exist, and "therefore there is no life," as Judith Butler says in *Frames of War*. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler calls the process of ideological Otherisation the "violence of derealization," where those who are already "derealized" are taken to be "spectral" and ever-renewing, justifying a continual war against the enemy that thrives on paranoia (34). Derealisation, as a discursive practice, normalises the camp condition that Agamben has called "bare life" (2017), a term borrowed from Benjamin's *bloßes Leben*, "mere life" (56). Agamben notes that bare life is a politicised "unconditioned exposure to death" (264) which is "killable" (351). Jews were turned into *homo sacer* or bandits. A Jew's existence was, as Agamben characterises it, "reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land" (150), turning them into a figure in-transit.

Trauma theory, since its inception in the 1990s, has reoriented our attention to witness and testimonial literature as essential resources of history and critical studies. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), Cathy Caruth (1996), and Kalí Tal (1996) have shown us how victim testimonies give us an opening to peer inside the unframeable grief with the help of psychoanalysis, deconstruction, literary analysis, and ethics, often literarily and intertextually.

Trauma theory is essentially interdisciplinary and intertextual in character. The screen memories and forced amnesia we frequently observe in trauma victims, which are also related to the inability to talk about it, are similarly intertextual in the sense that they need a trigger to come to the fore. For example, Janina Bauman's memoir of her camp experience was triggered by the trauma of her mother's death. This double coup, double blow, or as Freud calls it, the belated effect of trauma that has an oscillating structure between past and present, and here and there, a spatiotemporal duality, characterises the act of recalling and retracing memory. This belated act of recalling, which also attempts to rationalise the trauma in question, giving it a structure and meaning, falls within the poetics of representation, or what White calls in *Tropics of Discourse*, emplotment. The transitory memory needs to be translated allegorically, intertextually, and transferentially to be disseminated to stay alive and afloat.

Notwithstanding Adorno's statement that "after Auschwitz writing poetry is barbaric" – a much-misunderstood formulation that I deal with in my discussion of Celan, who was a friend of Adorno, it is safe to say that the Holocaust experience, its mind-boggling complexity, even in its fairly blunt aim has given rise to numerous works of art, often brilliantly experimental. Literature, like history, in its intertextuality and celebration of chronotope, can be considered a work of spectrography, as Derrida calls it in *Echographies of Television*. Every act of recalling is not only representational but also interpretative – emplotting and complotting – a transferential act of either intralinguistic, interlinguistic, or intersemiotic translation as Derrida implies following Roman Jakobson ("Relevant", 2001, 182). These translatory engagements with memory, binding the author often with the witness in a testimonial relationship, Derrida notes, act like mourning (199) for leaving the remainder unattended, where the "spoken body" does not correspond with the "translated body" (184) – the original text survives in the translated form, haunting the second text as a body that is de-

composed and re-composed (199-200). According to Benjamin, translation is an exploration of interlingual cohabitation ("The Task of the Translator," *One-Way* 32) and "mutual agreement" (38), and in this context, he anticipates Derrida's concept of *différance* of traces, in alterity, renewal, and change in the survival of the original text (33-34), like any living being. Thus, translation becomes a life-giving, generative, or creative, a "transplant" (37), an exercise which is implied in Benjamin's use of *Überleben* ("survival") and *Fortleben* ("continued existence") (31) of texts. Translation reframes what is mourned and renewed for further witnessing.

Thus, through the allegory of translation, intertextuality, *flaschenpost*, palintrope, and the uncanny, I wish to show how, for the bare life, allegorised as kynical-creaturely, the truth comes into the opening indirectly, which is similarly framed in heterogenous forms, as allegory. Truth is unconcealed as the other truth, as truths, since the architext is mimetically produced. Between a translation and the original text, there is always a gap where unconcealment locates itself, and it is our best chance to understand and interpret the past in a constellatory network.

Chapter One

In this chapter, I discuss the French-Romanian poet Paul Celan and his works as translated by John Felstiner, where the German and English texts come together to form a symbiotic testimony on the poetics of witnessing and translation. I consider Felstiner's translations as examples of generative transcreations, transferential in his choice to keep the architexts often untranslated or rendered in the hypertextual network, as a provocation to the readers. The ethics of translation that come to the fore in this context make us aware of translation's responsibility to unconceal hidden connections. Celan himself was a translator and lived within the trajectory of originality and inspiration. Translation's ethicity compels us

to retrace Celan's journey as a witness/poet who stands opposed to Adorno's memorable and inhibitory formulation of writing poetry after Auschwitz as barbaric. I show how Adorno himself rephrased the decree a few times to put it into perspective. Contrary to popular perception, Adorno was an enthusiast of experimental literature, especially those produced by Beckett and Celan. The cultural context of Adorno's traumatic inhibition is an important marker where Auschwitz not only symbolises a death camp but also stands for the total seizure of power as a metaphor for totalisation. Celan's Kynical appropriation of the language of his erstwhile master and his careful recrafting of it show a political awareness of the discursive impact of rhetoric. In his texts, we find an anti-Auschwitz turn of the German language, which becomes a part of semantic denazification, defamiliarising the familiar language – a haunting of the uncanny.

In my essay, I focus on, along with Celan's now canonical "Todesfuge," his later poems beginning from *Breathturn* (1967). Whereas I especially discuss Celan's many attempts to dissociate himself from the fame of "Todesfuge" as befits someone who wanted to dismantle any structure that perpetuates the Holocaust as a course of action, I also show how his repeated rewritings of the poem later in his career, borrowing images, motifs, and expressions from it, is symptomatic of being haunted by the memory of the traumatic event and an anxious and belated effort to make sense of it. "Todesfuge" itself has a very suggestive life in many translations. It was first published in Romanian translation and not in its original language of composition. Of all the later translations of the poem in the English language, Felstiner's translation stands out because it is an example of inter and intralinguistic translation where the increasing presence of the original language in the English language at once shows how Celan subsumes his translator as an authorial presence; and a failure to replicate the trauma of the primary witness by a secondary one provoking a chain of re-attempts to translate the poem. Felstiner's biography of Celan records not only

Celan's anxieties as a poet/witness but also his own struggle as a translator to choose one expression over the other – essentially a dilemma that every historian goes through.

Celan's late poems, as Felstiner notes in his biography, reverberate with Shakespearean themes of "beauty, time, death, memory, regeneration, poetry itself" (206). Since 1963, when Celan was translating Shakespeare's sonnets, we see an intertextual negotiation that addresses the readers directly in a dialogical relationship – a theme that Celan elaborates on in his "Meridian" and "Bremen" speeches, developing an ethics of poetry as a conversation with "an addressable Thou" (Celan 396). I read the "Meridian" as a text that conforms and embraces all the thematics and problematics that I wish to address in this thesis, where the creaturely condition of the Jew allegorising the poet is given an important place. This essay, along with his poems, recurs throughout the dissertation as the architextual reminder on which I anchor my arguments. The dialogic reinscription of literature, of poems, by Celan is also symbolic of bearing memory through regeneration – testimony as an extension of procreation, as Derrida notes in his study on Celan (*Sovereignties*). Celan is also a rebellious intellectual in his embracing of the polyglossic body in his creation, challenging the "monolingualism of the other," as Derrida phrases it. However, from *Breathturn* onwards, we see a gradual emergence of silence as a "counterword" (Joris 17). Heavily criticised for his cryptic language and unfairly accused of plagiarism, the realisation that "No one/ bears witness for the / witness" (Celan 261) may have contributed to his decision to take his own life. He chose 20th April, Hitler's birthday, in 1970 to commit suicide.

Chapter Two

This chapter deals with Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, which tells the story of a Paul Celan-like figure, Jakob Beer. Jakob is a poet and translator who witnesses the persecution of his family in his childhood but manages to save himself with the help of

Athos, who soon becomes a father figure to him. In a literal performance of "cohabitable" existence, each reaching after the other, Jakob gradually learns to speak of himself – growing out of infancy, etymologically, which means someone who cannot speak. In a maze of intertextual references that frequently looks back to classical literature – it is initially set in Greece – including *The Three Musketeers*, the Bible, Jewish theology, and a wide span of geography, from Poland via Greece to Canada, *Fugitive Pieces* weaves a hypertextual loop where the architext of memory plays the central role. Jakob Beer bears the image of his elder sister, Bella, who assumes the status of a signpost – the figural for the Holocaust. Athos, who is an excavator and archaeologist, gently and carefully prods Jakob towards his potential while, at the same time, he continues to intellectually stand against the revisionist historical disinformation perpetrated by the Nazis. They moved to Canada, poignantly evoking the image of Kanada in concentration camps, where Athos dies while still writing *Bearing False Witness* – a book that exposes Nazi distortion of history, recalling the title of Klemperer's diary *I Will Bear Witness*. Jakob, the son, the witness, the historian, and the "supplanter", finishes the book for him while looking for the trace of Bella. In his choice of English, and relentless search for Bella in creative works, we find the kynical attempt to convey truth through learned discourse or diatribe.

Regeneration and responsibility are two critical themes in the book – Jakob's failure as a brother and son drives him to compensate for it as a creative writer and a potential father. However, he fails to father a child, which introduces us to another important character in the text. Ben, a neighbour of Jakob in Canada, is the child of Holocaust survivors. Since he does not have access to the experience of his parents, he fails to understand the traumatised behaviour of his parents. This postmemorial gap separates him emotionally from his parents, and he finds a congenial spirit in Jakob, who, in an uncanny repetition of the past, considers him as a son. Ben, etymologically meaning "son," undertakes the responsibility of a

witness/historian retracing the steps of Jakob after his death, and the journal he discovers in Greece becomes the text of *Fugitive Pieces*, which begins with the announcement of Jakob's death with his second wife, Michaela.

I read the ethical poetics of *Fugitive Pieces* with Avishai Margalit's *The Ethics of Memory*, Paul Celan's poems, and Michaels's poem, "What the Light Teaches." The "I-Thou" relationships that this novel explores are hinged on the ethics of absolute risk for the other; *Fugitive Pieces* is a text on responsibility and care, both as a duty towards the other and as a mourning. Its circular structure is not only haunting, chiasmic, and uncanny, it is also replete with the responsibility of generative transference that transplants the bearing of memory as an ethical duty – a debt that must be paid and paid infinitely. We not only read Jakob's journal via Ben but also have the duty to continue telling the story – the text begins where the journal ends and turns back to haunt us with the fore-knowledge of how the story ends – essentially how history and often classical literature operate. Yet, we read them, recounting, reciting, and marvelling at the newer idioms and unconcealed facets that we might have missed earlier; the text ends with a clue of a new beginning, much like the mourning plays Benjamin reads to develop his theory of allegory, that startles us and compels us to begin again. The tale ends, but without closure. Jakob's tale is an education in historiography under the guise of fiction.

Chapter Three

In Chapter Three, I read one of the most remarkable writers of the Holocaust experience, Imre Kertész, whose books on the traumatic event form a strange body of repetition, betrayal, and uncategorisable textuality. Hungary was a Nazi satellite state which the Bolsheviks later occupied, and after the dissolution of Soviet Russia, it has been deliberately trying to deny its voluntary participation in the Holocaust. The gradual

ideological stultification of the memory of the Holocaust is perhaps the most crucial theme in Kertész's personal fiction. I discuss *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* and *Liquidation*, the last two books of the Holocaust tetralogy that he wrote, along with *Fateless* and *Fiasco*, to show how Kertész, as a kynical witness to the rule of ideology where discursive violence and genocidal mania change the social fabric irreparably, reinscribes his memories in dynamic textuality. Kertész's genre-bending texts, which he refused to identify as autobiographical, do not conform to the mainstream expectations of the Holocaust memoirs. They are viciously "kynical," ironic, postmodern, existential, and even poignantly funny. Opposing Adorno's view, Kertész defends an intertextual recreation of memory, which might not be autobiographical, but is personal and historically responsible. Like Celan, he also exiled himself voluntarily to a foreign country, Germany, but unlike Celan, he wrote and translated in his mother tongue, Hungarian. His memorial texts deal with the anxiety of procreation and witnessing, of resisting deliberate distortion of history, spectrally haunting his narrators. Exemplifying Sloterdijk's notion of Jewish kynicism, which makes the Jews aware of the permanence of their learned countering as opposed to the fragile ego of the sovereign, Kertész is the cheeky meta-cynic who exposes the mask that fascism puts on in different manifestations. He shows that beneath every mask, the face remains the same, and that is why he posits that it is only under the Soviet occupation of Hungary that he understood the real ordeal he had to undergo in his childhood when he was sent to different Nazi camps. Kertész's texts explicitly introduce the motif of a double blow, where a late event triggers the memory of an earlier happening, helping to rationalise and represent it. His texts are also indicative of the dialogism of memory, which I study in the next chapter.

Kertész, as I have already noted, is a kynical, ironic witness to ideological hysteria and mocks the ideological stereotyping of witness literature as a profitable venture in *Liquidation*. *Liquidation* is an anxious text that simultaneously exposes the corporatocracy

behind the Holocaust and its ideological representation and the undeniable necessity of responsible postmemorial witnesses, which is also a criticism of Soviet bureaucratic control of every agency. This oscillation between uncertainties ends with two deaths: the fictional writer, B, commits suicide, and the manuscript that B produced is burnt. The consequent parody of a self-appointed witness, K, and the metatextual reflections on the fictional author and what might have driven him to commit suicide produce an absurdist text that admixes the comic and the tragic, where the question of different kinds of existences is shown gradually in the process of liquidation. Authorship and authority are pitted against each other, problematising both, where the cynical ego-driven false witness tries to assert his presence. *Liquidation* is a fiasco that a fateless writer/survivor faces without an addressable reader.

Kertész, in these two texts, repurposes tales from the earlier two volumes, and all these texts dialogically form a fragmented life strained by political imperatives. Not only that, both *Kaddish* and *Liquidation* extensively use, especially the former one, intertextual references to Nietzsche, Rilke, and Paul Celan to develop transferential poetics in search of novel idioms for the extraordinary situations that they unfold. The unconcealed knowledge is in conversation with other texts and other experiences, and together, they help further our understanding without claiming to offer a paradigmatic truth. Kertész exposes the cynicism of anything that represents a monolithic structure, dismantling it from the inside through repetition and self-aware metatextual and hypertextual undoing.

Chapter Four

In this chapter, I come back to the issue of intertextual memory, or as Rothberg has called it, “multidirectional” memory and to the aesthetic of complicity through a reading of Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, first published in 1988, which is an exception to my research period but provides an essential plank for me as a postcolonial postmemorial subject

to read the current developments of the Holocaust studies, which includes a colonial-turn and a focus on different silent signifiers that have hitherto been neglected, like complicity, and implicated subject. Hugo Baumgartner, who came to India before the Holocaust and whose mother perished in the Holocaust, provides a complex figural for our understanding of a Western genocide and a Westerner's understanding of colonial corporation. At the fag-end of the British occupation of India, Baumgartner witnesses many incomprehensible, but because of the contemporary racial discourse, "normalised" colonial practices. I read Baumgartner as a liminal figure to test different categorical imperatives before concluding that Baumgartner is better described as a kynic who deliberately practices askesis and nonviolent life, positioning himself as an anomalous presence in the turbulent climes of colonial and postcolonial awakening. Baumgartner, in his status as an alien, could only manage to cohabit with the natives of an alien nation, who have started politically to assert their cosmopolitanism. India, in its diversity, is a land of many languages and cultures, and yet this social fabric is ruptured by the colonial power, leading to the Bengal famine and riots in the wake of the Partition. As a white man, Baumgartner feels uncomfortable with these turns of events. As a Jewish persecuted minority who is jailed as an "alien" subject by the British, the colonial enterprise becomes a stand-in for a "concentrationary universe", and Baumgartner soon realises that he is an uncanny figure who is and is not a victim of Western ideologies. Essentially a threshold figure, he roams around the streets of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, always homeless and pining for a home in the German language.

Baumgartner is an aloof ironic figure, a "mere life" who escaped the fate of "bare life." He lives like what Santner has called a "creature," an ambiguous figure always observing and living in the periphery. As a complicit subject, he knows that the position of a victim changes according to the political climate, where the oppressed can easily become the oppressor. This chiasmic movement structures his life as a recluse. When Baumgartner is at

the cusp of solitude, at that very moment, the past returns to haunt him. As a responsible and caring human being, he undertakes to look after a German nomad, Kurt, who, without any provocation, kills the Jew. Ideological violence is self-replenishing, and fascism is a presence that does not die. In a sense*, Baumgartner's Bombay* is a rewriting of "Heart of Darkness," only here, the colonial Kurtz is replaced by the fascist Kurt in the incomprehensible colonised nation of India, and the racial binary presented in the text leaves its trace of colonial trope even in the figure of Baumgartner. Fascism and colonialism are similar and take place simultaneously. Here, Desai, who wrote *Baumgartner's Bombay* inspired by an experience as a translator, assumes the role of a kynical ironist who unmasks the trauma of colonialism intertextually reading the metaphorical presence of the Holocaust, appropriating its insight to foreground the colonial exploits of an equally heinous crime. It is not an act of trifling the memory of the Holocaust or of the Partition; it is an instance of what Spivak has termed critical intimacy, which intertextually reads multiple insights appropriatively, working with and subverting (Spivak 4) the critical and memorial tools that we have at our disposal, reinscribing the theoretical insights of Holocaust studies in planetary possibilities.

Conclusion

In the concluding chapter, I wish to map the emerging branches of Holocaust studies, including Snyder's book on the Holocaust as an environmental tragedy, Neiman's, and Wilkerson's comparative studies of race, religion, and caste as an essential part of minority-phobia, and the recent resurgence of gendered analysis of the Holocaust. The newer models of comparative and confrontational studies of the Holocaust have opened up a critical pathway to upend the paradigmatic status of the Holocaust. Even though paradigm functions like allegory, helping us to understand the other texts positioned in front of it, we are heading towards a solidaritarian and relational understanding of different forms of genocides. Here again, I go back to Foucault, who proposes that in the kynic's discourse of parrhesia directed

to others for the betterment of humankind in general, we can trace a dialogical relationship established through homologia, which means solidaritarian and equalitarian discourses that do not vie for hegemony. Based on diacritical choices, such discourses can complement and better frame truth in intertextual allegiance. Diacritical homologia, thus, is the practice of translational reinscription of allegory in heterogenous alterity where the other is accepted and respected as the other and not subsumed under the regime of singularity. I argue that the future of Holocaust studies is headed towards a geographical and cultural constellation where it will be equally challenged and embraced as a site of contesting, haunting, disruptive, and cohabitable architext.

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